

12th May 2024 Annual Council Meeting

Mayoral Inauguration

Minutes of the proceedings of the **FIFTY-FIRST ANNUAL MEETING** of **WOKINGHAM TOWN COUNCIL** held this day in the **MAIN HALL, TOWN HALL, WOKINGHAM**, from 12.00 noon to 12.55 pm.

PRESENT:

Chair: Cllr S Gurney (Mayor)

Cllrs: B Alvi, A Betteridge, R Bishop-Firth, B Callender, R Comber, P Cunnington, W Dixon, A Domingue, M Gee, C Jamthe, A Jones, T Lack, K Malvern, M Malvern, A Medhurst, N Nagella, I Shepherd-Dubey and L Timlin

IN ATTENDANCE:

Katy Hughes – Town Clerk

Nikki Payler – Civic Officer

Dr Stefan Fafinski and Emily Fafinski (Deputy Lieutenant and wife)

Mr Alexander Barfield – (High Sheriff of Berkshire)

Sir Jonathan Redwood – Member of Parliament for Wokingham

Lucy Zeal– High Steward of Wokingham

Cllr Beth Rowland – Borough Mayor of Wokingham

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received and accepted from Cllrs S Cornish, A Croy, M Fumagalli and H Richards.

COMMUNICATION (Agenda Item 2)

The retiring Mayor, Councillor Sally Gurney, addressed the meeting:

“ This has been one of the hardest speeches I’ve ever had to write. Not because I don’t know what to say, but because I could talk for ages about all the amazing things we’ve done, events we’ve been to, and especially the incredible people we’ve met.

As I think back over this last year, my heart is filled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and pride. Serving as your mayor has been a privilege beyond measure, and I am profoundly thankful for the trust and support you have placed in me. If this year has shown me one thing, it’s that the community spirit in Wokingham runs deep and true.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my time as mayor has been the chance to see the incredible work of our local charities and organizations first hand. Whether it was attending a garden party at a Baron’s house, to telling our most self-effacing civic awardee how truly special they are for working as a full time unpaid volunteer at the foodbank, I’ve had the privilege of meeting with countless individuals dedicated to making our community stronger, more vibrant, and more inclusive. I’d always known there’s a lot happening in Wokingham, but I didn’t truly

CHAIR’S INITIALS _____



appreciate just how many thousands and thousands of hours are volunteered by so many people in so many ways. One example that left us in awe were the hundred or so volunteers who cooked, delivered and served delicious food and spent time with people on Christmas Day so that others wouldn't be lonely.

Amongst many other things, I've had the privilege of opening the community gardens at the fire station and hospital, the new kitchen at the Emmbrook Football Club, and attending the re-opening and rededication of All Saints. Each of these facilities helps foster a strong sense of belonging and pride in our community. I've had the pleasure of welcoming many new people to our town, and have witnessed how fast they fall in love with it, and how quickly they become part of the very fabric of Wokingham. I recall meeting one family newly from Hong Kong at our first Lunar New Year celebration, only to see them fully immersed in community life just a year later. Their story is a testament to the welcoming and inclusive spirit in our town.

Throughout all of this, Chris, my Consort and wonderfully supportive partner, has been by my side throughout it all. Your unwavering support and shared commitment to our town have been a source of strength for me. I am so proud of you that everything you've experienced in this role encouraged you in turn to put yourself forward for election to work for the continue good of this town and local area. I have a small gift for you as memento of our time in this role.

Another person who has been with me every step of the way – quite literally – is our Mace Bearer and Mayor's Attendant, David. He said I wasn't to give him anything, because he's paid to do this, but he is the embodiment of going above and beyond the call of duty – and I'm not good at doing what I'm told. Your support, advice, and good humour have been appreciated by us both, and your ability to put names to faces is astounding. I hope that you will accept this small gift despite prior protestations!

Rob, thank you for agreeing to be my Deputy Mayor, when you were but a week into your role as a newly elected Councillor. You have filled in for me when I was working or away and when we were double booked, and I know you'll do the role proud in the year to come. I've done my best to reach out to as many community groups as I can to fill up your diary, but you are in good hands with David and Nikki, and I wish you all the best with a busy year ahead of you. Enjoy it!

Our exceptional Civic Officer and Mayor's Secretary, Nikki, deserves special recognition for her tireless efforts to ensure that everything runs smoothly behind the scenes. I'm sure that having a chaos goblin as mayor this year has been challenging, but your extraordinary skill and dedication have transformed chaos into order, and I am truly grateful for your patience and your invaluable contributions that have helped make everyone we meet feel special. Thank you.

CHAIR'S INITIALS _____



One of those who I hope has felt very special this year is Leah, our amazing Mini-Mayor. Leah, you have brought boundless joy and energy to all our endeavours, and your cheerful presence and infectious enthusiasm have uplifted us all. I have loved every minute I've spent with you, whether on a stage or in a jail cell, and I hope you have enjoyed this experience as much as I have. You are a credit to your family, your friends, and your school, and I am confident that you will continue to inspire those around you with your kindness and grace.

Unusually for a mayor, I chose a Humanist Celebrant to be my Mayor's Chaplain this year. It was important to me that my choice of chaplain reflected my values, honoured my beliefs, and was as inclusive as possible. I met Helen two years ago to talk about a crazy idea which seemed so very far away in both time and probability, and yet here we are. Helen, please accept my sincerest thanks; your insightful and thought-provoking words were better and more pertinent than I could ever have imagined, and I am truly delighted that you have been on this journey with us.

Each year, the Mayor chooses a charity to support, and this year, I chose Berkshire Search and Rescue Dogs. For those at whom I haven't enthused about them repeatedly, they are a small but incredible group – the largest dog team in England, yet at the last official count, just 22 operational humans, 28 dogs, and a handful of other volunteers. They are on call 24/7 every day of the year to help the police in locating and reuniting high-risk, vulnerable missing people with their loved ones. From specialist equipment to insurance, continuous training and requalification, their annual budget of £15,000 is entirely funded by the volunteers' own subscriptions, donations, and other fundraising efforts.

Chris & I have become regulars at their training days, hiding in the woods for the dogs to find, and will continue to do so – until Chris wears me down and gets a dog to join the team himself! Many individuals, local organisations, businesses, and other charities have contributed to my charity this year, and I am extremely grateful to each and every one of you. I even got to help brew a limited edition charity collaboration beer, Follow Your Nose, with Elusive Brewery, and they are continuing to sell it at their tap room, online, and at the Party in the Park in a few weeks, so there will be more to follow! But for now, I am delighted to be able to present the wonderful BSARD team with this giant cheque which represents donations received for the Mayor's Charity throughout the year.

There are so many more people to whom I am grateful. Katy, our still-new town clerk, who keeps us on the straight and narrow and doesn't balk at anything thrown her way. All of our officers, who manage the council's work competently and cleverly, and realise our sometimes crazy ideas. Each of you, my fellow councillors, who give up your time freely and willingly for the betterment of our

CHAIR'S INITIALS _____



town for residents and businesses alike. And our Honoraries, who turn out time and time again to our ceremonial and civic events such as this, and who are part of our big family that is Wokingham Town Council.

And my final, special thanks must go to one of our Honorary Constables, David Ashley-Down, who has decided his marching days are over and is retiring after almost 30 years of service. David used to be a special constable in Reading and then in Wokingham. While he was a constable, he was asked if he would guard the Town's silver at a Council event at a golf club. He did such a good job, that they suggested he apply for the role of Honorary Constable, and the rest, as they say, is history! Thank you for your service, and know that, as with Stan who you served with for 18 years, you will always be one of the family.

Throughout all of this year, we've seen how our greatest strength lies in our ability to involve everyone, to be sustainable, and to foster a sense of community which transcends boundaries. As my time as Mayor comes to a close, I carry with me a profound sense of gratitude and pride for the opportunity to serve this remarkable town.

So let us continue to serve our community willingly, enthusiastically, and collaboratively, for the good of all who call this place home. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for the privilege of serving as your Mayor. May we continue to write the next chapter of our town's history together, with courage, compassion, and a steadfast commitment to building a brighter tomorrow for all."

Cllr A Jones gave a short speech of thanks for the outgoing Mayor:

"I first met Sally when, as a nosy resident, I attended an Annual Town Meeting to find out what went on in this historic building. I sat down with Sally and she explained her role as a Town Councillor. What struck me was her cheerfulness, enthusiasm and sense of duty.

These skills and many others have served her well as Mayor, except that on the odd occasion, she does forget people's names!

The number of events that Sally and her Consort Christ have attended in this Mayoral year is quite staggering. These, in the main, recognise the outstanding contributions of individuals and organisations to enhance and enrich the lives of the community as a whole.

There have been some light hearted events in the year, for example, opening a new taproom on behalf of Elusive Brewing or opening a new kitchen at my football club, Wokingham and Emmbrook.

At every full council meeting, Sally passionately relates her highlights of these visits.

CHAIR'S INITIALS _____



On behalf of the Town Council, Honorary Dignitaries and, more importantly, the people of this great town, I would like to thank you, Sally and thank you Chris, for all your hard work during the past twelve months and wish you all the best for the future.”

ELECTION OF TOWN MAYOR (Agenda Item 3)

The retiring Town Mayor invited nominations for the office of Town Mayor for the ensuing year.

Cllr A Betteridge gave a short speech in support of his nomination for Cllr Rob Comber:

“It is my privilege to introduce Rob Comber as nominee to be the 50th Mayor of Wokingham Town. Rob has lived in Wokingham for 40 years. He has been an excellent Deputy Mayor for the past 12 months, in which he has revelled in meeting members of the communities and groups with which the council works. He is a serious and committed councillor but also a pleasure to work with on the council. He will be a superb representative of the council and our town.”

Cllr M Gee offered her support of her nomination for Cllr Rob Comber:

“I have known Rob for 35 of the 40 years he has lived in Wokingham. He is proud of Wokingham and all that it has to offer. I know he will make an excellent Mayor.”

It was proposed by Cllr A Betteridge and the nomination was seconded by Cllr M Gee and it was

**RESOLVED
30828**

that Cllr Rob Comber be elected as the Town Mayor for the ensuing year.

The guests were then entertained by The Redlands Quartet.

Declaration of the Result of Election

The Town Clerk declared Cllr R Comber be duly elected to the Office of Town Mayor for the ensuing year.

DECLARATION OF ACCEPTANCE OF OFFICE (Agenda Item 4)

The Town Mayor duly made his Declaration of Acceptance of Office, which was witnessed by Cllr A Betteridge and Cllr M Gee.

ADDRESS BY TOWN MAYOR (Agenda Item 5)

The new Town Mayor then gave his introductory speech.

“Distinguished guests, fellow councillors, family, friends, residents, welcome, and thank you for coming today.

CHAIR'S INITIALS _____



Standing up here, in these historic, but relatively intimate surroundings, clothed as I am in fancy dress, I feel as though I should be telling jokes to you, and being heckled by those in the front row. In truth, for those of you who know me, I have a tendency to be overly irreverent and to look for the humour in things. I feel as though I should have been a part of Ricky Gervais' family, where apparently his brothers had a rule that if you thought of something funny, you had to say it, whatever the consequences, win, lose or draw.

At this point our Town Clerk & Mayor's Secretary are getting nervous about what I might say next! Much to your relief I am sure, I am going to restrain myself, and avoid the jokes today, with the possible exception of when I call for nominations for the Honorary Burglar.

Firstly, I would also like to thank Sally & her consort Chris for all the work they have done over the past year. Sally will be a hard act to follow. Not only am I going to find it difficult to follow Sally's hairstyle, I think I might find it difficult to follow her work ethic.

Only a year ago I was first elected to the Town Council, and in an act of what I can only describe as mild insanity, I agreed to be Deputy Mayor without the slightest idea of what I was getting into. At that time Sally said that, as she had a full-time job, many of the events during the working week might fall to me as Deputy. That is not quite how it turned out. Sally hoovered up every single event she could, because she loved doing them. The effort she put into it over the last year is remarkable. Having spoken to Chris, her consort, I think it was more than he'd signed on for. So, thanks Sally.

Secondly, I would like to thank all of the Councillors & their families. Although elected, Town Councillors are volunteers who give their time and effort to the Council and to the community for no reward, and indeed sometimes for a little mild abuse from some of our residents. All part of the job. And although many of us got elected by being a part of one political party or another, I am very pleased to say that with very few exceptions, politics is left at the door here, and members just get on with things together and try to do their best for their community. Personally, I have found that quite rewarding.

Some of you will have already heard me say this before, but I would like to explain why I stood for Mayor. When I agreed to stand for Deputy Mayor. It was on the strict proviso that I was NOT agreeing to run for Mayor at any stage.

However, in my time as Deputy Mayor, I have been involved with a number of groups and people who support everything from plants to people to puppy dogs. They do this for no reward, and for little to no recognition. And they do this in their hundreds.

I was so astonished, and impressed, and basically just blown away, by the numbers of people giving so much time, effort and money, that the very least I could do was to support them. As Mayor I can support, promote and give recognition to what these people do. And if I could, I should.

CHAIR'S INITIALS _____



My chosen charity to support during my year as Mayor is SHARE Wokingham. This is a local charity, only established during Covid, but demand means it now operates through many different locations, mostly in the town and borough. It focuses, as its core service, on obtaining and distributing fresh food, which would otherwise be discarded by food wholesalers and retailers. Food banks and the like get donations of tinned food, nappies and so forth. But fresh food, which we recommend people eat more of, is in short supply.

SHARE provides it to those who need it. They also take the opportunity to talk to people that need its services, to provide social interaction, and to identify other areas of need. Claire, who set up SHARE, and is here today, has spawned other mini charities helping transition people off food banks and the like, providing furniture & household equipment for refugees and victims of domestic abuse, and I suspect she will just keep going and find other needs to fulfil. I don't want to embarrass her too much, but Claire Revie is a very impressive woman. I hope you'll help me support Share through the coming year.

In summary, it is seeing what SHARE and all those other remarkable people and organisations in the town, and in the Borough do, solely out of the goodness of their hearts, that considerably improved my view of human nature, considerably humbled me, and made me stand for Mayor of this lovely town.

I am honoured to have been elected as Mayor & first citizen of Wokingham. Thank you.

NOMINATIONS FOR THE OFFICE OF DEPUTY MAYOR (Agenda Item 6)

The Town Mayor stated that it was usual for the incoming Mayor to indicate their wishes for Deputy Mayor and his nominee was Cllr Louise Timlin.

**RESOLVED
30829**

It was proposed by Cllr A Domingue and seconded by Cllr A Mather and it was that Cllr L Timlin be duly elected as the Deputy Mayor for the ensuing year.

The Redlands Quartet offered further musical accompaniment.

Declaration of the Result of Election for Deputy Mayor

The Town Mayor declared Cllr L Timlin be duly elected to the Office of Deputy Town Mayor for the ensuing year.

HONORARY APPOINTMENTS (Agenda Item 7)

The Town Mayor asked that it should be noted again for record purposes, that Lucy Zeal was granted life tenure of the Office of High Steward of Wokingham at the Council meeting held on 13th May 2018.

The Town Mayor asked for it to be recorded in the minutes that thanks be given to Lucy Zeal for her continued support to the Town Council.

The Mayor asked for nominations for the offices of the following:

CHAIR'S INITIALS _____



- Town Crier
- Honorary Constables
- Honorary Meteorologist
- Honorary Bugler
- Honorary Parade Marshal

**RESOLVED
30830**

It was proposed by Cllr T Lack and seconded by Cllr R Bishop-Firth and it was that the following continue in their appointments:

- Mr Nigel Hopkins as Town Crier
- Mr Martin Bishop as Honorary Constable
- Mr Neil Hodgson as Honorary Constable
- Mr Bernard Burton as Honorary Meteorologist
- Mr Damon Emes as Honorary Bugler
- Major James Chappell as Honorary Parade Marshal

And that the council appoints Mr Paul Baily as a new Honorary Constable

ADJOURNMENT (Agenda Item 8)

**RESOLVED
30831**

It was proposed by Cllr W Dixon, and seconded by the Cllr B Alvi, and it was that the meeting be adjourned until Wednesday 15th May, 7.30pm in the evening.

The Town Mayor then declared the meeting adjourned and those present stood and sang the first verse of the National Anthem.

The Town Mayor then invited those present to join him for light refreshments.

The Town Crier requested that guests remain standing whilst the Mayoral party retired to the Council Chamber.

CHAIR'S SIGNATURE _____

CHAIR'S INITIALS _____

